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ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

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John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: 1 John 4:17-21, Mark 4:35-41

"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"
Mark 4:38(NRSV)

Most of us try to live with the illusion that we are actually in control of our lives. We like to think that "I'm in charge here," that we are making the necessary decisions, laying out the appropriate strategies, devising the time-line for our own lives according to our own purposes which will allow us to do everything we want to do — to be rich, successful, and to live happily ever after. We even go to seminars and workshops and hire expert consultants to help us be intentional about our career path, our life story, our ultimate purpose and destiny.

And every so often something totally unexpected happens, and we learn the difficult lesson that we aren't always in control; that there are forces or fates larger than we are.

It's a lesson city people know better than anybody else. We commissioned a study once of the spiritual needs of young urban professionals. It said that yuppies, all city people in fact, have to learn to live with a sense that there are huge threatening forces out there which have a major impact on the way we live and over which we have little control. City people have to learn to be loose, flexible, able to cope with traffic jams at inappropriate times, jack hammers during worship, even folding chairs in this beloved Gothic sanctuary.

In a column I keep on file, humorist Dave Barry says it is the difference between urbanites and suburbanites. Suburban people go to the movies for excitement. Urban life is like living in the middle of a movie. Suburbanites worry about things like the price of cauliflower. Urbanites wonder if they are going to make it through the subway ride.

That set me to thinking. I was a suburbanite once. Crabgrass was my burning obsession. I battled it for years, squirted it with chemicals which turned out to be so toxic you can no longer purchase them; dug it out root at a time; nd one time resorted to General Sherman's scorched earth march to the sea policy: killed it all — crabgrass, entucky Blue and everything between — and started over. I look back on it now with both relief but some nostalgia. Crabgrass was a worthy opponent but ultimately I was in control. The outcome of the struggle was mine to determine, not the crabgrass, a product of my time, energy and budget.

Now, every so often, I am reminded that I am not in control of much of anything, not to mention my fate. It happens when I do something no more dramatic than get into a taxi. Now, please hear me say that the majority of Chicago cabdrivers are safe, prudent, aggressive but skilled drivers, many of whom are eager to be polite and even show passengers the city at its best. But every now and then there is one whose purpose, I am convinced, is to teach me something theological, something about human vulnerability, mortality and lack of ultimate control. I didn't know it was possible to hit seventy miles per hour on Michigan Avenue between two traffic lights. A young man and some friends I know got in a cab in the Loop and headed for Lincoln Park late at night. They said they were in a hurry. "You're in a hurry, huh?" said the driver. "All right, watch this.". . . and he drove the length of Michigan Avenue without stopping for a red light; and finally at North Avenue and Lake Shore Drive simply veered over the curb and treated his passengers to a wild ride through the park on the grass. My best/worst experience was with a driver whose purpose was to deliver lectures on American foreign policy, particularly as that policy impacted his nation. When I offered a modest rejoinder he became very angry, drove faster and faster while turning around to engage me in debate. I finally asked him to let me out before we hit the Michigan Avenue bridge.

Dr. Herbert Benson, an expert on stress who teaches at Harvard Medical School says,

> "Most of us find that we are helpless in solving the big problems. Our concern usually involves everyday difficulties. Our frustrations come about because we generally can't even solve the less earthshaking problems such as being on time for work in a large, congested city."
> [*The Relaxation Response*, p. 17]

And Martin Marty takes it a huge step further in a recent essay in a theological journal. Professor Marty argues that for the first three quarters of this century, human life seemed to be under control of forces of unification. The human race seemed to be busily bringing everything together, healing, reconciling, building community, binding together: The United Nations, UNESCO, the United Church of Christ, the World and National Councils of Churches, e Ecumenical Council called Vatican II. Sociologists talked about the Global Village, Space Ship Earth, the Human ramily. University of Chicago professor of Christian Ethics, Gibson Winter, expressed an eloquent vision of the city as the

> "realization of the unity of life out of the conflicting factions. . . fulfillment of the oneness of mankind."

Lewis Mumford talked expansively about

> "civilization becoming the ending process of creating one world and one humanity."

But now, at the end of this century, a dramatic change has occurred. The momentum has shifted. The energy is in the particular, the local, the tribal. We seem to be under the influence of a great mysterious cosmic centrifugal force that is causing everything which was united to fly apart. Nations have simply disappeared before our eyes, reduced to their constituent parts. The Soviet Union is no more. Yugoslavia is no more. Czechoslovakia is no more. Even Canada seems to want to come apart. The forces of unity are not in control, it seems. [Martin E. Marty, *Theology Today,* "From the Centripetal to the Centrifugal in Culture and Religion," April 1, 1994]

Well, what do you do when you are clearly not in control anymore? One thing you can do is despair, be anxious, get depressed. Another thing you can do is turn to someone who promises order and control: a politician or political movement, a religious or spiritual leader. Both totalitarian political movements and fanatic religious cults appeal to the deep human need for order and control. Mussolini, it is said, made the trains run on time. Hitler promised economic order and control. Cult leaders provide a controlling and controlled intellectual, emotional and physical structure that has enormous appeal when it feels like everything is flying apart.

What to do when you are clearly no longer in control?

One time long ago, a group of the friends of Jesus found themselves out of control in the most terrifying way. They had pushed off from shore in a small fishing boat one evening — the first century equivalent, I suppose, of hopping in a Chicago taxicab.

This story is in all three Synoptic Gospels. Mark, John Dominic Crossan points out, thinks this story is so central to the meaning of the Gospel that he tells it twice, once in the fourth chapter and another version of the same story in the sixth chapter. It is a familiar and beloved story.

The small group of men and women who followed Jesus around Galilee had watched as the crowds, who came to see him and to bring their sick and crippled, had grown in size. This day the crowd was so large that he had to stand in a boat a few yards off shore in order to address them. As the day came to end with the sun setting in the west, the crowd showed no sign of dispersing. So it was Jesus who suggested that they make a night crossing to the other side of the lake, interestingly, in order to establish a little more control over his own schedule.

That's a serious proposal, by the way. In the first place, it's new and unchartered territory for them on the other side of the lake. Galilee is home; the people over there are strangers, different. Maybe they spoke a different language. Maybe they are gentiles.

And it is no small thing to sail across at night. I've not done it, but sailing friends tell me it can be challenging and tricky — which for real sailors means fun, and for innocent passengers can mean frightening. One experienced ·ailor put it this way:

first - you ~~see~~ row a little boat

"Just before dawn the funny stuff starts to happen. Everyone else is asleep and it's just you out there surrounded by black water as far as you can see — especially if there is no moon — and your eyes start to play tricks on you."
[Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, "The Fourth Watch," p. 97]

So it's very dark; they have no running lights, no battery, no fog lights and it's far too wet to keep an oil lamp burning. And then the pleasant light breeze of early evening stiffens and the sea comes up and before they know it they are beating into one of the quick and fierce squalls characteristic of that inland Sea of Galilee.

My guess is that the little fishing boat was a frantically busy place. They are trying to haul the sail in, as the boat pitches up and down and the ones at the oars are trying to keep it pointed into the waves which means that they're getting soaked every couple of seconds but its better than getting sideways and simply disappearing under a wave, and the rest are bailing frantically with bowls, cups, their hands and someone is trying to steady the rudder and they are holding on to the sides and to one another. All except one who is unaccountably, incredibly, asleep, in the prow. Perhaps he's sheltered. "Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?" It sounds so objective, almost academic. Drowning people don't ask philosophic questions. Surely it was more like a terrified shout: "For God's sake Jesus, we're going down. Get awake and lend a hand!"

And then, as they recalled it decades later, telling and retelling the stories, he said "Peace! Be still!" and that's what happened. And they recalled his asking them why they were afraid. Had they no faith? And they recalled the peculiar reaction they all had they learned later as they talked about it. They were filled with fear, more fear than they felt at wind and waves, a different and deeper fear actually, more like awe.

There's a lot going on there. There's the early church expressing its faith in a God who is sovereign even over the forces that control nature. There is the Christian faith confronting one of the oldest and most mysterious of human fears, the fear of water. Creation takes place when dry land separates water. Oceans are seen as threats to life. The far reaches of the ocean are where there are indescribable threats. Have you ever seen an ancient map which contains around the perimeters pictures of dragons and the Latin words: "Monsters here."

So, at a very basic level this story is testimony to a Lord who is sovereign over all powers that threaten human life. It is not a promise that if you believe enough, if you have faith, you will avoid all storms, or that God will protect you from all harm. That is one of the unfortunate conclusions we sometimes reach when we read stories about miraculous healings, intercession in natural processes, interventions in nature like the healing of the epileptic son of the father who said, "I believe: help my unbelief." If Jesus healed him, why not me? If Jesus saved those men in the storm why couldn't he have interceded on behalf of those fourteen brave firefighters in Colorado last week who were caught in a firestorm?

God's sovereignty over nature is a difficult idea for us but not for them. In fact, in the ancient world there is no concept of nature independent from God. Everything in nature was a product of divine activity. 2,000 years later, on this side of a scientific revolution, we still stand in awe before the mystery, but we do not mean by God's sovereignty over nature that God intercedes in nature to help people — or to hurt them. It means that God's power is more real than nature's power. That nature is God's creation too. That God the Creator has fashioned a living creation in which humanly tragic occurrences are always a possibility and a threat. There were a lot of people Jesus did not heal. The Hot Shots died trying to save a town because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dear ones contract diseases. Good men and women and children experience tragedy.

The word here is not that God, in Jesus Christ, protects believers from suffering and tragedy. The word for us here is a question we all have asked at one time or another: "Do you not care?" And the answer: the answer eloquently expressed in his presence before he says a word to still the storm. He's in the boat with them. They are all in this together and he's there too.

I think that's news we need. Not so much that Jesus will help us avoid troubles or sickness or tragedy: not so much that Jesus will establish order and control in our out-of-control lives, but that we are not alone. When the storm hits, when life careens out of control, when our dear one dies, or we lose a job, or our family comes apart, or our most precious relationship ends, or we, ourselves, find that we are perishing, he's in the boat too, riding out the storm with us.

When Madeleine L'Engle's husband was dying and there was simply nothing more medically that could be done she wrote:

> "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights."
> [*Two-Part Invention*, p. 124]

"The ministry of presence" we sometimes call it. There are times when we can't do anything to make things right for our dear ones or for ourselves, to establish order or gain control. There are times when there is nothing to say, no words to heal and calm and sustain. Sometimes all we can do is be present, to sit with our friend, to hold a hand, to be lovingly but silently there. It's often all that is required. We ministers learn it and so do you. It's what church is about: it's a ministry we offer to one another in every storm.

The promise is that Jesus is in the boat with us: sometimes not saying or doing much except riding out the storm with us. Sometimes, many times, it's all we need.

Douglas John Hall teaches that the essence of faith is trust: that believers in Jesus are not so much people who know certain things to be true, or experience certain things about him; believers in Jesus are those who will trust him, who — even though they are afraid of a lot of things, including all kinds of storms — are willing to trust their lives to him because they know more deeply and profoundly than they know anything, that we are all in this boat together and that he is in it with us.